

## Transitioning from Now to Next: Leading Through a Time of Accelerating Change

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The COVID-19 pandemic has forced nonprofit leaders to face many uncertain scenarios and make rapid adjustments to their operational models in order to continue to meet the needs of their constituents and deliver on their mission.

Stan Reiff, Partner and Professional Practice Leader – Consulting at CapinCrouse, talked with industry thought leader Ben Stroup about his insights into the mindsets of leaders who are resistant to change. Ben is the Chief Growth Architect and President of Velocity Strategy Solutions.

**Stan Reiff:** While the COVID-19 pandemic is a unique situation, nonprofit leaders are not unfamiliar with the burdens and pressures of change. With every advance in technology, every disruptor entering the market, and every piece of feedback from constituents, leaders are faced with the choice between remaining comfortable or changing their approach to meet demand.

**Ben Stroup:** As you said, the rate of change happening within and outside organizations is putting pressure on leaders, their existing models, and their preferred ways of thinking and operating. Leaders are given the opportunity to adjust and adapt before the changing marketplace realities crush current operational models and likely force them into a defensive, reactive leadership posture.

**Stan:** That is quite a burden for leaders to bear. How can leaders maneuver in this intimidating, changing landscape?

**Ben:** It is crucial for leaders to confront the fears behind the thinking that is keeping them from living their full potential while leading through a time of unprecedented change in operational structures, assumptions, practices, growth, revenue, and value creation. The most important factor in determining an organization's propensity to grow is whether or not senior leadership has a bias toward growth.

I would like to say this is often simple, overt, and easy to spot. However, leaders have learned how to disguise their discomfort with change. Through language, disciplines, and expectations, many have all but ensured actual growth never happens. Often, this may be done subtly or even subconsciously.

**Stan:** Has this intense pressure to change always been on senior leaders? Or have there been changes in the market over the years?

**Ben:** Over prior decades, the marketplace realities that many senior leaders experienced throughout their careers changed only incrementally. Today, however, the speed of change is accelerating at a rate much faster than any single leader or team can understand, process, analyze, assimilate, and integrate into their organization. It's not their fault. No one said this was going to happen. But even though they didn't ask for it, it's happening. While it may not be their doing, their lack of adaptation will ultimately be their undoing.

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The next few years will bring about massive changes in how organizations are constructed and how they engage the market, build brands, relate to employees and contractors, develop and serve their customers or clients, design and deliver products, and so on. There will likely be no part of an organization that will not be swept into the change cycle around digital transformation, even if it is not distinctly a digital organization.

**Stan:** Very interesting. So it sounds like leaders need to be prepared to face and contemplate change much more frequently than in the past. I'm assuming that leaders will need to update their mindsets accordingly?

**Ben:** That is absolutely right. There must be some reconciliation of the types of thinking that are holding

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leaders back from leaning into the growth potential that is right in front of them. Transformative mindset shifts don't happen through external measures. Rather, they occur when we intentionally and strategically confront, analyze, and dismantle the thinking that is holding us back. When we reshape our thinking, we can more clearly interpret the entire world around us. If our thinking contains flawed, outdated, or biased assumptions that are no longer true, we will miss the cues necessary for us to transition from now to next.

**Stan:** Now Ben, you are a business leader yourself and you work with a lot of other business leaders through Velocity's work. Have you noticed any common mindsets regarding change that you think are holding people back?

**Ben:** For sure. When I was thinking through this topic, I came up with eight statements that I commonly hear from leaders facing change and the fears behind those statements. The first is "We need to cut edge initiatives and redirect those funds to existing lines of business that are in decline."

To this leader I would say that the fear of failure is real. But every established program began as an edge initiative. The only difference today is you won't have decades to develop your prototype, mitigate risk, and then deliver your product or solution to market. Functioning as an effective leader in the next decade will require you to embrace your own individual ability to adapt and to create an organizational culture where "failing together" is an acceptable step on the path to achieving success. It's normal for this to feel uncomfortable or foreign at first — it is a muscle that must be developed through practice and repetition.

The second objection to change is something like "Data is helpful, but I'm trusting my gut on this one."

The fear behind this statement shows a belief that a senior leader's experience is no longer valuable. This is not true. Rather, data allows you to challenge or validate your intuition to increase the speed at which you can bring your solution to market. Addressing this fear requires a mindset shift toward viewing data as a tool for empowering your decision making, rather than a threat to your leadership.

**Stan:** Ok, so these first two statements show that these leaders are much more comfortable investing in their current infrastructure and maintaining the status quo than considering that change might be beneficial for their organizations. What are the next two?

**Ben:** The third statement that I often hear is "We can't afford to implement acquisition strategies right now."

Leaders who make this statement fear what would happen if they abandon the financial forecasts and models upon which they've created operational dependencies and planning. If you're not growing your pipeline, you're dying. Fear-based decision making often paralyzes you within the past — both past models and past successes — so focus on reorienting your vision to be future-focused.

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Next, I often hear leaders say "Our strategy is to go back to the basics and do what we know how to do." The fear behind these words points to uncertainty about how new strategies will ask one to grow and change as a leader. You may think you don't have the energy for what change will ask of you but expecting growth as you've experienced it in the past is a strategy that ensures failure. The solution here is to channel the motivation, determination, and diligence that propelled you to leadership in the first place so it can motivate you to embrace the discomfort of the challenging new environment you face.

**Stan:** From these statements, it sounds like leaders might be hesitant to change because they aren't willing to do the research on what new methods might be out there. The fear of the unknown can lead to a lot of false assumptions and make leaders miss out on beneficial initiatives that could be cheaper or simpler than they expect. What's next?

**Ben:** Another very common one that I hear is "We can't afford to focus on lifetime value."

Leaders who say this don't yet fully understand how to organize around the customer experience. This impacts attribution models and departmental structures, and even threatens our ideas of what something as simple as a campaign looks like. Instead, start by investing time in educating yourself on how other companies or

organizations calculate customer lifetime value and incorporate it into their growth strategies, and then evaluate what applications can be drawn for your own organization. The parallels may not be perfect, but as any surveyor or explorer will tell you, knowledge of the landscape helps dispel fear.

Sixth, there are many leaders who believe that “Everything is a priority, and everything must perform at projected revenue levels.”

It can be frightening to not be sure of what to focus on at what time, and not be able to envision what success actually looks like. When you don't have clarity the perception of risk multiplies, and then you may exchange a bias for action with a bias for excuses. Dismantling this fear requires carving out time to hit the pause button, reflect, and thoughtfully prioritize the tasks for your team — the ones that are not only urgent but important and future-focused. When everyone has clarity, you're able to embrace acceptable risks and move forward more effectively.

**Stan:** It sounds like these leaders are overwhelmed by the macro-decisions and don't realize that things become clearer as you break them down into micro-decisions that can be prioritized and delegated to the appropriate team members. And what are the final two statements that you often hear from leaders?

**Ben:** That's right, Stan. Another common one is “I value my leadership team because of their loyalty and years of service.”

The fear behind this statement may be hiding the reality that leaders might have to confront the fact that the current team isn't the right one for the next season of growth and change. That's tough. And deep within senior leaders is also the fear that they themselves might not be the right leader for this next season. Addressing this requires reflection, self-awareness, and a deep level of honesty with yourself and your team.

And finally, I hear leaders say things like “We are committed to achieving the kind of growth we know, understand, and are prepared to experience.”

The fear in this statement reveals a loss of memory with regard to past successes. It's natural to want to repeat what you've experienced in the past, especially if it was positive. But you have to remember that even past experiences were new breakthroughs at one point. Adjusting your mindset will be critical to achieving the next

success. If something is not challenging, then it rarely leads to growth. If it's not growth, then it's maintenance and not leadership.

**Stan:** These are great insights, Ben. Hopefully leaders and organizational stakeholders are able to integrate your responses and solutions to these fears into their mindsets and plans moving forward during this current economic climate and beyond. What words of advice do you have for leaders as they aim to conquer their fears?

**Ben:** I would tell leaders to be brave. The alternative should really scare you.

Fear is a normal and natural part of the leadership experience. Leadership is hard, especially when you are the person everyone is looking to for the right decision. In a culture of change, the bias should be towards growth, learning, and thoughtful experimentation. If you value compliance, predictability, and the familiar, then you aren't leading. Instead, by your personal preference and professional experience you are holding yourself and everyone else captive.

This season of change and transformation is requiring you to be courageous and brave. It's asking you to forge uncharted territory and to go where few have gone before. You will have to hold loosely to the things you understand today to make room in your thinking and decision making to discover new approaches, methods, and insights. Moving forward in this way will create new realities and growth opportunities for you and the organization you lead. This begins with you. It begins with your mindset, which you have the power to shift. It begins with your vision for the future, which you get to set. It begins with boldness.

As one of my mentors is fond of saying, “Look it in the teeth, even if it bites back.”

**Stan:** Thanks so much for joining us today, Ben, and for helping our audience recognize the fears that may be holding them back and providing them with practical solutions for shifting their mindsets.

#### **Additional Resources:**

[Breakthrough Leadership – How to Thrive in Uncertain Times](#) – Recorded webcast

[8 Things Leaders Say When They Fear Change \(And How to Confront Those Fears\)](#) – by Ben Stroup

## About the Authors

### **Ben Stroup, Chief Growth Architect & President**

Velocity Strategy Solutions  
615.324.7862

Ben Stroup is Chief Growth Architect and President of [Velocity Strategy Solutions](#), a business management consulting firm helping leaders take their ideas from mind to market. Ben helps leaders design, develop, and deploy data-driven business growth strategies. Ben is a futurist, disruptor, digital master, content activist, and data champion. As a growth architect for business, Ben leads a team that takes a data-driven approach to business management consulting, which allows them to assist leaders in bridging the gaps between ideas, innovation, and revenue.

### **Stan Reiff, Partner**

Professional Practice Leader – Consulting  
sreiff@capincrouse.com  
o 505.50.CAPIN ext. 1306

Stan Reiff serves as Partner and Professional Practice Leader – Consulting at CapinCrouse. Stan's professional experience includes over 35 years in ministry operations, public accounting, government accounting, and missions. He provides strategic leadership of the firm's professional advisory and consulting services, including research of emerging issues in the faith-based nonprofit sector and the development and implementation of products and services in response to those needs.

## About CapinCrouse

As a national full-service CPA and consulting firm devoted to serving nonprofit organizations, CapinCrouse provides professional solutions to organizations whose outcomes are measured in lives changed. Since 1972, the firm has served domestic and international outreach organizations, universities and seminaries, foundations, media ministries, rescue missions, relief and development organizations, churches and denominations, and many others by providing support in the key areas of financial integrity and security. With a network of offices across the nation, CapinCrouse has the resources of a large firm and the personal touch of a local firm. Learn more at [capincrouse.com](#).

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